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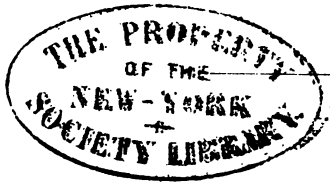
A DETECTIVE STORY

BY

ANNA KATHARINE GREEN

AUTHOR OF "THE LEAVENWORTH CASE," "A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE," ETC.

[Mrs. A.K. Rohlf's.]

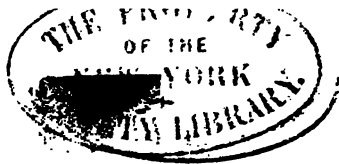


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X. Y. Z.

A STORY TOLD BY A DETECTIVE.

I.

THE MYSTERIOUS RENDEZVOUS.

SOMETIMES in the course of his experience, a detective, while engaged in ferreting out the mystery of one crime, runs inadvertently upon the clue to another. But rarely has this been done in a manner more unexpected or with attendant circumstances of greater interest than in the instance I am now about to relate.

For some time the penetration of certain Washington officials had been baffled by the clever devices of a gang of counterfeiters who had inundated the western portion of Massachusetts with spurious Treasury notes. Some of the best talent of the Secret Service had been expended upon the matter, but with no favora-

ble result, when, one day, notice was received at Washington that a number of suspicious-looking letters, addressed to the simple initials, X. Y. Z., Brandon, Mass., were being daily forwarded through the mails of that region ; and it being deemed possible that a clue had at last been offered to the mystery in hand, I was sent northward to investigate.

It was in the middle of June, 1881, and the weather was simply delightful. As I stepped from the cars at Brandon and looked up the long straight street with its double row of maple trees sparkling fresh and beautiful in the noonday sun, I thought I had never seen a prettier village or entered upon any enterprise with a lighter or more hopeful heart.

Intent on my task, I went straight to the post-office, and after coming to an understanding with the postmaster, proceeded at once to look over the mail addressed to the mysterious X. Y. Z.

I found it to consist entirely of letters. They were about a dozen in number, and were, with one exception, similar in general appearance and manner of direction, though inscribed in

X. Y. Z.

widely different handwritings, and posted from various New England towns. The exception to which I allude had these few extra words written in the lower left-hand corner of the envelope: "*To be kept till called for.*" As I bundled up the letters preparatory to thrusting them back into the box, I noticed that the latter was the only one in a blue envelope, all the others being in the various shades of cream-color and buff.

"Who is in the habit of calling for these letters?" I asked of the postmaster.

"Well," said he, "I don't know his name. The fact is nobody knows him around here. He usually drives up in a buggy about night-fall, calls for letters addressed to X. Y. Z., and having got them, whips up his horse and is off again before one can say a word."

"Describe him," said I.

"Well, he is very lean and very lank. In appearance he is both green and awkward. His complexion is pale, almost sickly. Were it not for his eye, which is keen and twinkling, I should call him an extremely inoffensive-looking person."

The type was not new to me. "I should like to see him," said I.

"You will have to wait till nightfall, then," returned the postmaster. "He never comes till about dusk. Drop in here, say at seven o'clock, and I will see that you have the opportunity of handing him his mail."

I nodded acquiescence to this and sauntered out of the enclosure devoted to the uses of the post-office. As I did so I ran against a young man who was hurriedly approaching from the other end of the store.

"Your pardon," he cried ; and I turned to look at him, so gentlemanly was his tone, and so easy the bow with which he accompanied this simple apology.

He was standing before the window of the post-office, waiting for his mail ; a good-looking, well-made young man, of a fine countenance, but with a restless eye, whose alert yet anxious expression I could not but note even in the casual glance I gave him. There appeared to be some difficulty in procuring him his mail, and each minute he was kept waiting seemed to increase his impatience almost be-

yond the bounds of endurance. I saw him lean forward and gasp out a hurried word to the postmaster, and was idly wondering over his anxiety and its probable causes, when I heard a hasty exclamation near me, and looking around, saw the postmaster himself beckoning to me from the door of the enclosure. I immediately hastened forward.

"I don't know what it means," he whispered ; "but here is a young man, different from any who have been here before, asking for a letter addressed to X. Y. Z."

"A letter?" I repeated.

"Yes, a letter."

"Give him the whole batch and see what he does," I returned, drawing back where I could myself watch the result of my instructions. The postmaster did as I requested. In another moment I saw the young man start with amazement as a dozen letters were put in his hand. "These are not all for me!" he cried, but even as he made the exclamation, drew to one side, and with a look of mingled perplexity and concern, began opening them one after another, his expression deepening to amazement as he

glanced at their contents. The one in the blue envelope, however, seemed to awaken quite different emotions. With an unconscious look of relief, he hastily read the short letter it contained, then with a quick gesture, folded it up and thrust it back into the envelope he held, together with the other letters, in his left hand.

"There must be another X. Y. Z.," said he, approaching the window of the post-office and handing back all the letters he had received, with the exception of the one in the blue envelope, which with a quick movement he had separated from the rest and thrust into his coat-pocket. "I can lay claim to none of these." And with a repetition of his easy bow he turned away and hurriedly quitted the store, followed by the eyes of clerks and customers, to whom he was evidently as much of a stranger as he was to me. Without hesitation I went to the door and looked after him. He was just crossing the street to the tavern on the other side of the way. I saw him enter, felt that he was safe to remain there for a few minutes, and conscious of the great opportunity awaiting me, hastened back to the postmaster.

"Well," cried I, in secret exultation, "our plan has worked admirably. Let me see the letters. As they have been opened, and through no fault of ours, a peep at them now in the cause of justice will harm none but the guilty."

The postmaster demurred, but I soon overcame his scruples ; and taking down the letters once more, hastily investigated their contents. I own that I was considerably disappointed at the result. In fact, I found nothing that pointed toward the counterfeiters ; only in each letter a written address, together with fifty cents' worth of stamps.

"Some common fraud," I exclaimed. "One of those cheap affairs where, for fifty cents enclosed, a piece of information calculated to insure fortune to the recipient is promised by return of mail."

And disgusted with the whole affair I bundled up the letters, and was about to replace them in the box for the third time when I discovered that it still held a folded paper. Drawing this out, I opened it and started in fresh amazement. If I was not very much mistaken in the appearance of the letter in the blue envelope

which I had seen the young man read with so much interest, this was certainly it. But how came it here? Had I not seen him thrust it back into its envelope and afterward put envelope and all into his pocket? But here was no envelope, and here was the letter. By what freak of necromancy had it been transferred from its legitimate quarters to this spot? I could not imagine. Suddenly I remembered that his hand had been full of the other letters when he put, or endeavored to put, this special one back into its envelope, and however unaccountable it may seem, it must be that from haste or agitation he had only succeeded in thrusting it between two letters instead of into the envelope, as he supposed. Whether or not this explanation be true, there was no doubt about my luck being in the ascendant. Mastering my satisfaction, I read these lines written in what appeared to be a disguised hand.

“All goes well. The time has come; every thing is in train, and success is certain. Be in the shrubbery at the northeast corner of the grounds at 9 P.M. precisely; you will be given a mask and such other means as are necessary

to insure you the accomplishment of the end you have in view. He cannot hold out against a surprise. The word, by which you will know your friends, is

COUNTERFEIT."

"Ah, ha!" thought I, "this is more like it." And moved by a sudden impulse, I hastily copied the letter into my memorandum-book, and then returning to the original, scratched out with my penknife the word northeast and carefully substituting that of southwest put the letter back into the box, in the hope that when he came to consult the envelope in his pocket (as he would be sure to do sooner or later) he would miss its contents and return to the post-office in search of it.

Nor was I mistaken. I had scarcely accomplished my task, when he reëntered the store, asked to see the letters he had returned, and finding amongst them the one he had lost, disappeared with it back to the tavern. "If he is surprised to read southwest this time instead of northeast, he will think his memory played him false in the first instance," cried I, in inward comment over my last doubtful stroke of policy; and turning to the postmaster, I asked him

what place there was in the vicinity which could be said to possess grounds and a shrubbery.

"There is but one," he returned, "Mr. Benson's. All the rest of the folks are too poor to indulge in any such gimcracks."

"And who is Mr. Benson?"

"Well, he is Mr. Benson, the richest man in these parts and the least liked as I take it. He came here from Boston two years ago and built a house fit for a king to live in. Why, nobody knows, for he seems to take no pleasure in it. His children do though, and that is all he cares for I suppose. Young Mr. Benson especially seems to be never tired of walking about the grounds, looking at the trees and tying up the vines. Miss Carrie is different; all she wants is company. But little of that has her father ever allowed her till this very day. He seems to think nobody is good enough to sit down in his parlors; and yet he don't sit there himself, the strange man! but is always shut up in his library or some other out-of-the-way place."

"A busy man?"

" I suppose so, but no one ever sees any thing he does."

" Writes, perhaps? "

" I don't know; he never talks about himself."

" How did he get his money? "

" That we don't know. It seems to accumulate without his help or interference. When he came here he was called rich, but to-day he is said to be worth three times what he was then."

" Perhaps he speculates? "

" If he does, it must be through his son, for he never leaves home himself."

" Has two children, you say? "

" Yes, a son and a daughter : a famous young man, the son ; not so much liked, perhaps, as universally respected. He is too severe and reticent to be a favorite, but no one ever found him doing any thing unworthy of himself. He is the pride of the county, and if he were a bit suaver in manner might have been in Congress at this minute."

" How old? "

" Thirty, I should say."

"And the girl?"

"Twenty-five, perhaps."

"A mother living?"

"No; there were some strange stories of her having died a year or so before they came here, under circumstances of a somewhat distressing nature, but they themselves say nothing about it."

"It seems to me they don't say much about any thing."

"That's just it; they are the most reserved people you ever saw. It is n't from them we have heard there is another son floating somewhere about the world. They never speak of him, and what's more, they never write to him; as who should know better than myself?"

An interruption here occurred, and I took the opportunity to saunter out into the crowd of idlers always to be found hanging around a country store at mail-time. My purpose was, as you may conceive, to pick up any stray bits of information that might be floating about concerning these Bensons. Not that I had as yet discovered any thing definite connecting this respectable family with the gang of counterfeiters

upon whose track I had been placed ; but business is business, and no clue, however slight or unpromising in its nature, is to be neglected when the way is as dark as that which lay before me. With an easy smile, therefore, calculated to allay apprehension and awaken confidence, I took my stand among these loungers. But I soon found that I need do nothing to start the wheel of gossip on the subject of the Bensons. It was already going, and that with a force and spirit that almost took my breath away.

“ A fancy ball ! ” were the first words I heard. “ The Bensons give a fancy ball, when they never had three persons at a time in their house before ! ”

“ Yes, and what’s more, they are going to have folks over from Clayton and Lawrence and Hollowell and devil knows where. It’s to be a smash up, a regular fandango, with masks and all that kind of nonsense.”

“ They say Miss Carrie teased her father till he had to give in in self-defence. It’s her birthday or something like that, and she *would* have a party.”

“ But such a party ! who ever heard the like in

a respectable town like this ! It 's wicked, that 's what I call it, downright wicked to cover up the face God has given you and go strutting around in clothes a Christian man might well think borrowed from the Evil One if he had to wear them in any decent company. All wrong, I say, all wrong, and I am astonished at Mr. Benson. To keep his doors shut as he has, and then to open them in a burst to all sorts of folly. We are not invited at our house."

"Nor we, nor we," shouted some half dozen.

"And I don't know of any one in this town who is," cried a burly man, presumably a butcher by trade. "We are not good enough for the Bensons. They say he is even going to be mean enough to shut the gates and not let a soul inside who has n't a ticket. And they are going to light up the grounds too !"

"We can peep through the fence."

"Much we will see that way. If you had said climb it—"

"We can't climb it. Big John is going to be there and Tom Henshaw. They mean to keep their good times to themselves, just as they have kept every thing else. It 's a queer set they are

anyway, and the less we have to do with them the better."

"I should like to see Hartley Benson in masquerade costume, I would."

"Oh, he won't wear any of the fol-de-rol; he's too dignified." And with that there fell a sudden hush over the crowd, for which I was at a loss to account, till, upon looking up, I saw approaching on horseback, a young man in whom I had no difficulty in recognizing the subject of the last remark.

Straight, slight, elegant in appearance, but with an undoubted reserve of manner apparent even at a distance, he rode up to where I stood, and casting a slight glance around, bowed almost imperceptibly, and alighted. A boy caught the bridle of his horse, and Mr. Benson, without a word or further look, passed quickly into the office, leaving a silence behind him that was not disturbed till he returned with what was evidently his noonday mail. Remounting his horse, he stopped a moment to speak to a man who had just come up, and I seized the opportunity to study his face. I did not like it. It was handsome without doubt; the features were

regular, the complexion fair, the expression gentlemanly if not commanding ; but I did not like it. It was too impenetrable perhaps ; and to a detective anxious to probe a man for his motives, this is ever a most fatal defect. His smile was without sunshine ; his glance was an inquiry, a rebuke, a sarcasm, every thing but a revelation. As he rode away he carried with him the thought of all, yet I doubt if the admiration he undoubtedly inspired, was in a single case mixed with any warmer feeling than that of pride in a fellow townsman they could not understand. "Ice," thought I ; "ice in all but its transparency !" So much for Benson the son.

The ball was to take place that very night ; and the knowledge of this fact threw a different light over the letter I had read. The word *mask* had no longer any special significance, neither the word *counterfeit*, and yet such was the tenor of the note itself, and such the exaggerated nature of its phrases, I could not but feel that some plot of a reprehensible if not criminal nature was in the process of formation, which, as a rising young detective engaged in a mysterious and elusive search, it behooved me to know. And

moved by this consideration, I turned to a new leaf in my memorandum-book, and put down in black and white the following facts thus summarily collected :

“ A mysterious family with a secret.

“ Rich, but with no visible means of wealth.

“ Secluded, with no apparent reason for the same.

“ A father who is a hermit.

“ A son who is impenetrable.

“ A daughter whose tastes are seldom gratified.

“ The strange fact of a ball being given by this family after years of reserve and non-intercourse with their neighbors.

“ The still stranger fact of it being a masquerade, a style of entertainment which, from its novelty and the opportunities it affords, makes this departure from ordinary rules seem marked and startling.

“ The discovery of a letter appointing a rendezvous between two persons of the male sex, in the grounds of the party giving this ball, in which the opportunities afforded by a masquerade are to be used for forwarding some long-cherished scheme.”

At the bottom of this I wrote a deduction :

“ Some connection between one or more members of this family giving the ball, and the person called to the rendezvous ; the entertainment being used as a blind if not as a means.”

It was now four o'clock, five hours before the time of rendezvous. How should I employ the interval ? A glance at the livery-stable hard by, determined me. Procuring a horse, I rode out on the road toward Mr. Benson's, for the purpose of reconnoitring the grounds ; but as I proceeded I was seized by an intense desire to penetrate into the midst of this peculiar household, and judge for myself whether it was worth while to cherish any further suspicions in regard to this family. But how to effect such an entrance ? What excuse could I give for my intrusion that would be likely to serve me on a day of such tumult and pre occupation ? I looked up and down the road as if for inspiration. It did not come. Meanwhile, the huge trees that surrounded the house had loomed in sight, and presently the beauties of lawn and parterre began to appear beyond the high iron fence, through which I could catch now and then

short glimpses of hurrying forms, as lanterns were hung on the trees and all things put in readiness for the evening's entertainment. Suddenly a thought struck me. If Mr. Benson was the man they said, he was not engaged in any of these arrangements. Mr. Benson was a hermit. Now what could I say that would interest a hermit? I racked my brains; a single idea came. It was daring in its nature, but what of that! The gate must be passed, Mr. Benson must be seen—or so my adventurous curiosity decided,—and to do it, something must be ventured. Taking out my card, which was simply inscribed with my name, I wrote on it, "*Business private and immediate,*" and assuming my most gentlemanly and inoffensive manner, rode calmly through the gate to the front of the house. If I had been on foot I doubt if I would have been allowed to pass by the servant lounging about in that region, but the horse carried me through in more senses than one, and almost before I realized it, I found myself pausing before the portico, in full view of a dozen or more busy men and boys.

Imitating the manner of Mr. Benson at the

post-office, I jumped from my horse and threw the bridle to the boy nearest me. Instantly and before I could take a step, a servant issued from the open door, and with an expression of anxiety somewhat surprising under the circumstances, took his stand before me in a way to hinder my advance.

"Mr. Benson does not receive visitors to-day," said he.

"I am not a visitor," replied I; "I have business with Mr. Benson," and I handed him my card, which he looked at with a doubtful expression.

"Mr. Benson's commands are not to be disobeyed," persisted the man. "My master sees no one to-day."

"But this is an exceptional case," I urged, my curiosity rising at this unexpected opposition. "My business is important and concerns him. He cannot refuse to see me."

The servant shook his head with what appeared to me to be an unnecessary expression of alarm, but nevertheless retreated a step, allowing me to enter. "I will call Mr. Hartley," cried he.

But that was just what I did not wish. It was Benson the father I had come to see, and I was not to be baffled in this way.

"Mr. Hartley won't do," said I, in my lowest but most determined accents. "If Mr. Benson is not ill, I must beg to be admitted to his presence." And stepping inside the small reception room at my right, I sat down on the first chair I came to.

The man stood for a moment confounded at my pertinacity, then with a last scrutinizing look, that took in every detail of my person and apparel, drew slowly off, shaking his head and murmuring to himself.

Meanwhile the mingled splendor and elegance of my surroundings were slowly making their impression upon me. The hall by which I had entered was spacious and imposing; the room in which I sat, a model of beauty in design and finish. I was allowing myself the luxury of studying its pictures and numerous works of art, when the sound of voices reached my ear from the next room. A man and woman were conversing there in smothered tones, but my senses are very acute, and I had no difficulty in overhearing what was said.

"Oh, what an exciting day this has been!" cried the female voice. "I have wanted to ask you a dozen times what you think of it all. Will he succeed this time? Has he the nerve to embrace his opportunity, or what is more, the tact to make one? Failure now would be fatal. Father—"

"Hush!" broke in the other voice, in a masculine tone of repressed intensity. "Do not forget that success depends upon your prudence. One whisper of what you are about, and the whole scheme is destroyed."

"I will be careful; only do you think that all is going well and as we planned it?"

"It will not be my fault if it does not," was the reply, uttered with an accent so sinister I was conscious of a violent surprise when, in the next instant, the other, with a burst of affectionate fervor, cried in an ardent tone :

"Oh, how good you are, and what a comfort you are to me!"

I was just pondering over the incongruity thus presented, when the servant returned with my card.

"Mr. Benson wishes to know the nature of

your business," said he, in a voice I was uncomfortably conscious must penetrate to the next room and awake its inmates to a knowledge of my proximity.

"Let me have the card," said I; and taking it, I added to my words the simple phrase, "*On behalf of the Constable of the town,*" remembering I had heard the postmaster say this position was held by his brother. "There," said I, "carry that back to your master."

The servant took the card, glanced down at the words I had written, started and hastily drew back. "You had better come," said he, leading the way into the hall.

I was only too glad to comply; in fact, escape from that room seemed imperative. But just as I was crossing the threshold, a sudden, quick cry, half joyful, half fearful, rose behind me, and turning, I met the eyes of a young lady peering upon me from a lifted *portière*, with an expression of mingled terror and longing that would have astonished me greatly, if it had not instantly disappeared at the first sight of my face.

"Pardon me," she exclaimed, drawing back with an embarrassed movement into the room

from which she had emerged. But soon recovering herself, she stepped hastily forward, and ignoring me, said to the servant at my side : " Jonas, who is this gentleman, and where are you taking him? "

With a bow, Jonas replied : " He comes on business, miss, and Mr. Benson consents to see him."

" But I thought my father had expressly commanded that no one was to be allowed to enter the library to-day," she exclaimed, but in a musing tone that asked for no response. And hastily as we passed down the hall, I could not escape the uneasy sense that her eager eyes were following us as we went.

" Too much emotion for so small a matter, and a strange desire on the part of every one to keep Mr. Benson from being intruded upon to-day," was my mental comment. And I was scarcely surprised when upon our arrival at the library door we found it locked. However, a knock, followed by a few whispered words on the part of the servant, served to arouse the hermit within, and with a quick turn of the key, the door flew back on its hinges, and the master of the house stood before me.

It was a moment to be remembered : first, because the picture presented to my eyes was of a marked and impressive character ; and secondly, because something in the expression of the gentleman before me showed that he had received a shock at my introduction which was not to be expected after the pains which had been taken to prepare his mind for my visit. He was a tall, remarkable-looking man, with a head already whitened, and a form which, if not bowed, had only retained its upright carriage by means of the indomitable will that betrayed itself in his eyes. Seen against the rich background of the stained-glass window that adorned one end of the apartment, his stern, furrowed face and eagerly repellant aspect imprinted itself upon me like a silhouette, while the strong emotion I could not but detect in his bearing, lent to the whole a poetic finish that made it a living picture which, as I have said, I have never been able to forget.

“ You have come from the constable of the town,” said he, in a firm, hard tone, impressive as his look. “ May I ask for what purpose ? ”

Looking around, I saw the servant had dis-

appeared. "Sir," said I, gathering up my courage, as I became convinced that in this case I had a thoroughly honest man to deal with, "you are going to give a fancy ball to-night. Such an event is a novelty in these parts, and arouses much curiosity. Some of the men about town have even been heard to threaten to leap the fences and steal a look at your company, whether you will or not. Mr. White wants to know whether you need any assistance in keeping the grounds clear of all but your legitimate guests; if so, he is ready to supply whatever force you may need."

"Mr. White is very kind," returned Mr. Benson, in a voice which, despite his will-power, showed that his agitation had in some unaccountable way been increased by my communication. "I had not thought of any such contingency," he murmured, moving over to a window and looking out. "An invasion of rowdies would not be agreeable. They might even find their way into the house." He paused and cast a sudden look at me. "Who are you?" he abruptly asked.

The question took me by surprise, but I

answered bravely if not calmly : " I am a man who sometimes assists Mr. White in the performance of his duties, and in case you need it, will be the one to render you assistance to-night. A line to Mr. White, if you doubt me——"

A wave of his meagre hand stopped me. " Do you think you could keep out of my house to-night, any one I did not wish to enter ? " he asked.

" I should at least like to try."

" A ticket is given to every invited guest ; but if men are going to climb the fences, tickets will amount to but little."

" I will see that the fences are guarded," cried I, gratified at the prospect of being allowed upon the scene of action. " I can hinder any one from coming in that way, if——" Here I paused, conscious of something, I could hardly say what, that bade me be cautious and weigh my words well. " If you desire it and will give me the authority to act for you," I added in a somewhat more indifferent tone.

" I do desire it," he replied shortly, moving over to the table and taking up a card. " Here

is a ticket that will insure you entrance into the grounds; the rest you will manage without scandal. I do not want any disturbance, but if you see any one hanging about the house or peering into the windows or attempting to enter in any way except through the front door, you are to arrest them, no matter who they are. I have an especial reason for desiring my wishes attended to in this regard," he went on, not noticing the preoccupation that had seized me, "and will pay well if on the morrow I find that every thing has gone off according to my desires."

"Money is a powerful incentive to duty," I rejoined, with marked emphasis, directing a sly glance at the mirror opposite, in whose depths I had but a moment before been startled by the sudden apparition of the pale and strongly agitated face of young Mr. Benson, who was peering from a door-way half hidden by a screen at our back. "I will be on hand to-night." And with what I meant to be a cynical look, I made my bow and disappeared from the room.

As I expected, I was met at the front door by Mr. Hartley. "A word with you," said he.

“Jonas tells me you are from the constable of the town. May I ask what has gone amiss that you come here to disturb my father on a day like this?”

His tone was not unkind, his expression not without suavity. If I had not had imprinted on my memory the startling picture of his face as I had seen it an instant before in the mirror, I should have been tempted to believe in his goodness and integrity at this moment. As it was, I doubted him through and through, yet replied with frankness and showed him the ticket I had received from his father.

“And you are going to make it your business to guard the grounds to-night?” he asked, gloomily glancing at the card in my hand as if he would like to annihilate it.

“Yes,” said I.

He drew me into a small room half filled with plants.

“Now,” said he, “see here. Such a piece of interference is entirely uncalled for, and you have been alarming my father unnecessarily. There are no rowdies in this town, and if one or two of the villagers should get into the

grounds, where is the harm? They cannot get into the house even if they wanted to, which they don't. I do not wish this, our first show of hospitality, to assume a hostile aspect, and whatever my father's expectations may be, I must request you to curtail your duties as much as possible and limit them to responding by your presence when called upon."

"But your father has a right to expect the fullest obedience to his wishes," I protested. "He would not be satisfied if I should do no more than you request, and I cannot afford to disappoint him."

He looked at me with a calculating eye, and I expected to see him put his hand in his pocket; but Hartley Benson played his cards better than that. "Very well," said he, "if you persist in regarding my father's wishes as paramount, I have nothing to say. Fulfil your duties as you conceive them, but don't look for my support if any foolish misadventure makes you ashamed of yourself." And drawing back, he motioned me out of the room.

I felt I had received a check, and hurried out of the house. But scarcely had I entered upon

the walk that led down to the gate, when I heard a light step behind me. Turning, I encountered the pretty daughter of the house, the youthful Miss Carrie.

"Wait," she cried, allowing herself to display her emotion freely in face and bearing. "I have heard who you are from my brother," she continued, approaching me with a soft grace that at once put me upon my guard. "Now, tell me who are the rowdies that threaten to invade our grounds?"

"I do not know their names, miss," I responded; "but they are a rough-looking set you would not like to see among your guests."

"There are no very rough-looking men in our village," she declared; "you must be mistaken in regard to them. My father is nervous and easily alarmed. It was wrong to arouse his fears."

I thought of that steady eye of his, of force sufficient to hold in awe a regiment of insurgents, and smiled at her opinion of my understanding.

"Then you do not wish the grounds guarded," I said, in as indifferent a tone as I could assume.

"I do not consider it necessary."

"But I have already pledged myself to fulfil your father's commands."

"I know," she said, drawing a step nearer, with a most enchanting smile. "And that was right under the circumstances ; but we, his children, who may be presumed to know more of social matters than a recluse,—I, especially," she added, with a certain emphasis, "tell you it is not necessary. We fear the scandal it may cause ; besides, some of the guests may choose to linger about the grounds under the trees, and would be rather startled at being arrested as intruders."

"What, then, do you wish me to do ?" I asked, leaning toward her, with an appearance of yielding.

"To accept this money," she murmured, blushing, "and confine yourself to-night to remaining in the background unless called upon."

This was a seconding of her brother's proposition with a vengeance. Taking the purse she handed me, I weighed it for a moment in my hand, and then slowly shook my head. "Impossible," I cried ; "but"—and I fixed my eyes

intently upon her countenance—"if there is any one in particular whom you desire me to ignore, I am ready to listen to a description of his person. It has always been my pleasure to accommodate myself as much as possible to the whims of the ladies."

It was a bold stroke that might have cost me the game. Indeed, I half expected she would raise her voice and order some of the men about her to eject me from the grounds. But instead of that she remained for a moment blushing painfully, but surveying me with an unfaltering gaze that reminded me of her father's.

"There *is* a person," said she, in a low, restrained voice, "whom I am especially anxious should remain unmolested, whatever he may or may not be seen to do. He is a guest," she went on, a sudden pallor taking the place of her blushes, "and has a right to be here; but I doubt if he at once enters the house, and I even suspect he may choose to loiter awhile in the grounds before attempting to join the company. I ask you to allow him to do so."

I bowed with an appearance of great respect. "Describe him," said I.

For a moment she faltered, with a distressed look I found it difficult to understand. Then, with a sudden glance over my person, exclaimed: "Look in the glass when you get home and you will see the *fac-simile* of his form, though not of his face. He is fair, whereas you are dark." And with a haughty lift of her head calculated to rob me of any satisfaction I might have taken in her words, she stepped slowly back.

I stopped her with a gesture. "Miss," said I, "take your purse before you go. Payment of any service I may render your father will come in time. This affair is between you and me, and I hope I am too much of a gentleman to accept money for accommodating a lady in so small a matter as this."

But she shook her head. "Take it," said she, "and assure me that I may rely on you."

"You may rely on me without the money," I replied, forcing the purse back into her hand.

"Then I shall rest easy," she returned, and retreated with a lightsome air toward the house.

The next moment I was on the highway with my thoughts. What did it all mean? Was it,

then, a mere love affair across which I had foolishly stumbled, and was I busying myself unnecessarily about a rendezvous that might mean no more than an elopement from under a severe father's eye? Taking out the note which had led to all these efforts on my part, I read it for the third time.

"All goes well. The time has come; every thing is in train, and success is certain. Be in the shrubbery at the northeast corner of the grounds at 9 P.M. precisely; you will be given a mask and such other means as are necessary to insure you the accomplishment of the end you have in view. He cannot hold out against a surprise. The word by which you will know your friends is
COUNTERFEIT."

A love-letter of course; and I had been a fool to suppose it any thing else. The young people are to surprise the old gentleman in the presence of their friends. They have been secretly married perhaps, who knows, and take this method of obtaining a public reconciliation. But that word "*Counterfeit*," and the sinister tone of Hartley Benson as he said: "It shall not fail through lack of effort on my

part!" Such a word and such a tone did not rightly tally with this theory. Few brothers take such interest in their sister's love affairs as to grow saturnine over them. There was, beneath all this, something which I had not yet penetrated. Meantime my duty led me to remain true to the one person of whose integrity of purpose I was most thoroughly convinced.

Returning to the village, I hunted up Mr. White and acquainted him with what I had undertaken in his name; and then perceiving that the time was fast speeding by, strolled over to the tavern for my supper.

The stranger was still there, walking up and down the sitting-room. He joined us at the table, but I observed he scarcely tasted his food, and both then and afterward manifested the same anxious suspense that had characterized his movements from the time of our first encounter.

II.

THE BLACK DOMINO.

AT half past eight I was at my post. The mysterious stranger, still under my direct surveillance, had already entered the grounds and taken his stand in the southwest corner of the shrubbery, thereby leaving me free to exercise my zeal in keeping the fences and gates free of intruders. At nine the guests were nearly if not all assembled; and promptly at the hour mentioned in the note so often referred to, I stole away from my post and hid myself amid the bushes that obscured the real place of rendezvous.

It was a retired spot, eminently fitted for a secret meeting. The lamps, which had been hung in profusion through the grounds, had been studiously excluded from this quarter. Even the broad blaze of light that poured from the open doors and windows of the brilliantly

illuminated mansion, sent no glimmer through the broad belt of evergreens that separated this retreat from the open lawn beyond. All was dark, all was mysterious, all was favorable to the daring plan I had undertaken. In silence I awaited the sound of approaching steps.

My suspense was of short duration. In a few moments I heard a low rustle in the bushes near me, then a form appeared before my eyes, and a man's voice whispered:

"Is there any one here?"

My reply was to glide quietly into view.

Instantly he spoke again, this time with more assurance.

"Are you ready for a counterfeit?"

"I am ready for any thing," I returned, in smothered tones, hoping by thus disguising my voice, to lure him into a revelation of the true purpose of this mysterious rendezvous.

But instead of the explanations I expected, the person before me made a quick movement, and I felt a domino thrown over my shoulders.

"Draw it about you well," he murmured; "there are lynx eyes in the crowd to-night." And while I mechanically obeyed, he bent down

to my ear and earnestly continued : “ Now listen, and be guided by my instructions. You will not be able to enter by the front door, as it is guarded, and you cannot pass without removing your mask. But the window on the left-hand balcony is at your service. It is open, and the man appointed to keep intruders away, has been bribed to let you pass. Once inside the house, join the company *sans cérémonie* ; and do not hesitate to converse with any one who addresses you by the countersign. Promptly at ten o'clock look around you for a domino in plain black. When you see him move, follow him, but with discretion, so that you may not seem to others to be following. Sooner or later he will pause and point to a closed door. Notice that door, and when your guide has disappeared, approach and enter it without fear or hesitation. You will find yourself in a small apartment connecting with the library.

“ There is but one thing more to say. If the wineglass you will observe on the library table smells of wine, you may know your father has had his nightly potion and gone to bed. But if it contains nothing more than a small white

powder, you may be certain he has yet to return to the library, and that by waiting, you will have the long-wished-for opportunity of seeing him."

And pausing for no reply, my strange companion suddenly thrust a mask into my hand and darted from the circle of trees that surrounded us.

For a moment I stood dumbfounded at the position in which my recklessness had placed me. All the folly, the impertinence even, of the proceeding upon which I had entered, was revealed to me in its true colors, and I mentally inquired what could have induced me to thus hamper myself with the details of a mystery so entirely removed from the serious matter I had in charge. Resolved to abandon the affair, I made a hasty attempt to disengage myself from the domino in which I had been so uncereemoniously enveloped. But invisible hands seemed to restrain me. A vivid remembrance of the tone in which these final instructions had been uttered returned to my mind, and while I recognized the voice as that of Hartley Benson, I also recognized the almost saturnine intensity of expression which had once before imbued his

words with a significance both forcible and surprising. The secret, if a purely family one, was of no ordinary nature ; and at the thought I felt my old interest revive. All the excuses with which I had hitherto silenced my conscience recurred to me with fresh force, and mechanically donning my mask, I prepared to follow out my guide's instructions to the last detail.

The window to which I had been directed stood wide open. Through it came the murmur of music and the hum of gay voices. Visions of a motley crowd decked in grotesque costumes passed constantly before my eyes. Sight and sound combined to allure me. Hurrying to the window, I stepped carelessly in.

A low guttural " Hugh ! " at once greeted me. It was from a mask in full Indian costume, whom I saw leaning with a warrior's well-known dignity against the embrasure of the window by which I had entered. Giving him a scrutinizing glance, I came to the conclusion he was a young and not inelegant man ; and impelled by a reasonable curiosity as to how I looked myself, I cast my eyes down upon my own person. I found my appearance sufficiently striking. The

domino, in which I was wrapped was of a brilliant yellow hue, covered here and there with black figures representing all sorts of fantastic creatures, from hobgoblins of a terrible type, to merry Kate Greenaway silhouettes. "Humph!" thought I, "it seems I am not destined to glide unnoticed amid the crowd."

The first person who approached me was a gay little shepherdess.

"Ah, ha!" was the sportive exclamation with which she greeted me. "Here is one of my wandering sheep!" And with a laugh, she endeavored to hook me to her side by means of her silver crook.

But this blithesome puppet possessed no interest for me. So with a growl and a bound I assured her I was nothing more than a wolf in sheep's clothing, and would eat her up if she did not run away; at which she gayly laughed and vanished, and for a moment I was left alone. But only for a moment. A masked lady, whom I had previously observed standing upright and solitary in a distant corner of the room, now approached, and taking me by the arm, led me eagerly to one side.

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“ Oh, Joe ! ” she whispered, “ is it you ? How glad I am to have you here, and how I hope we are going to be happy at last ! ”

Fearing to address a person seemingly so well acquainted with the young man whose place I had usurped, I merely pressed, with most perfidious duplicity, the little hand that was so confidently clasped in mine. It seemed to satisfy her, for she launched at once into ardent speech.

“ Oh, Joe, I have been so anxious to have you with us once again ! Hartley is a good brother, but he is not my old playmate. Then father will be so much happier if you only succeed in making him forget the past.”

Seeing by this that it was Miss Carrie Benson with whom I had to deal, I pressed the little hand again, and tenderly drew her closer to my side. That I felt all the time like a villain of the blackest dye, it is quite unnecessary for me to state.

“ Has Hartley told you just what you are to do ? ” was her next remark. “ Father is very determined not to relent and has kept himself locked in his library all day, for fear you should

force yourself upon his presence. I could never have gained his consent to give this ball if I had not first persuaded him it would serve as a means to keep you at a distance ; that if you saw the house thronged with guests, natural modesty would restrain you from pushing yourself forward. I think he begins to distrust his own firmness. He fears he will melt at the sight of you. He has been failing this last year and—" A sudden choke stopped her voice.

I was at once both touched and alarmed ; touched at the grief which showed her motives to be pure and good, and alarmed at the position in which I had thrust myself to the apparent detriment of these same laudable motives. Moved by a desire to right matters, I ventured to speak :

"And do you think," I whispered, in purposely smothered accents, " that if he sees me he will relent ? "

" I am sure of it. He yearns over you, Joe ; and if he had not sworn never to speak to you again, he would have sent for you long ago. Hartley believes as well as I that the time for reconciliation has come."

"And is Hartley," I ventured again, not without a secret fear of the consequences, "really anxious for reconciliation?"

"Oh, Joe! can you doubt it? Has he not striven from the first to make father forget? Would he encourage you to come here to-night, furnish you with a disguise, and consent to act both as your champion and adviser, if he did not want to see you and father friends again? You don't understand Hartley; you never have. You would not have repelled his advances so long, if you had realized how truly he had forgiven every thing and forgotten it. Hartley has the pride of a person who has never done wrong himself. But even pride gives way before brotherly affection; and you have suffered so much and so long, poor Joe!"

"So, so," thought I, "Joe is then the aggressor!" And for a moment, I longed to be the man I represented, if only to clasp this dear little sister in my arms and thank her for her goodness. "You are a darling," I faintly articulated, inwardly determined to rush forthwith into the garden, hand over my domino to the person for whom it was intended, and make my escape from a

scene which I had so little right to enjoy. But at this instant an interruption occurred which robbed me of my companion, but kept me effectually in my place. A black domino swept by us, dragging Miss Benson from my side, while at the same time a harsh voice whispered in my ear :

“To counterfeit wrong when one is right, necessarily opens one to misunderstanding.”

I started, recognizing in this mode of speech a *friend*, and therefore one from whom I could not escape without running the risk of awakening suspicion.

“That is true,” I returned, hoping by my abrupt replies to cut short this fresh colloquy and win a speedy release.

But something in my answer roused the interest of the person at my side, and caused a display of emotion that led to quite an opposite result from what I desired.

“You awaken a thousand conjectures in my mind by that reply,” exclaimed my friend, edging me a little farther back from the crowd. “I have always had my doubts about—about—” he paused, hunting for the proper phrase—

"about your having done what they said," he somewhat lamely concluded. "It was ~~so~~ unlike you. But now I begin to see the presence of a possibility that might perhaps explain much we never understood. Joe, my boy, you never said you were innocent, but——"

"Who are you?" I asked boldly, peering into the twinkling eyes that shone upon me from his sedate mask. "In the discussion of such matters as these, it would be dreadful to make a mistake."

"And don't you recognize your Uncle Joe?" he asked, with a certain plaintive reproach somewhat out of keeping with his costume of "potent, grave, and reverend signior." "I came over from Hollowell on purpose, because Carrie intimated that you were going to make one final effort to see your father. Edith is here too," he murmured, thrusting his face alarmingly near mine. "She would not stay away, though we were all afraid she might betray herself; her emotions are so quick. Poor child! *she* never doubted you; and if my suspicions are correct——"

"Edith?" I interrupted,—"*Edith?*" An Edith

was the last person I desired to meet under these circumstances. "Where is she?" I tremulously inquired, starting aside in some dismay at the prospect of encountering this unknown quantity of love and devotion.

But my companion, seizing me by the arm, drew me back. "She is not far away; of that you may be sure. But it will never do for you to try and hunt her up. You would not know her in her mask. Besides, if you remain still she will come to you."

That was just what I feared, but upon looking round and seeing no suspicious-looking damsel anywhere near me, I concluded to waive my apprehensions on her account and proceed to the development of an idea that had been awakened by the old gentleman's words.

"You are right," I acquiesced, edging, in my turn, toward the curtained recess of a window near by. "Let us wait here, and meantime you shall tell me what your suspicions are, for I feel the time has come for the truth to be made known, and who could better aid me in proclaiming it than you who have always stood my friend?"

"That is true," he murmured, all eagerness at once. Then in a lower tone and with a significant gesture: "There *is* something, then, which has never been made known? Edith was right when she said you did not steal the bonds out of your father's desk?"

As he paused and looked me in the face, I was obliged to make some reply. I chose one of the non-committal sort.

"Don't ask me!" I murmured, turning away with every appearance of profound agitation.

He did not suspect the ruse.

"But, my boy, I shall have to ask you; if I am to help you out of this scrape, I must know the truth. Yet if it is as I suspect, I can see why you should hesitate even now. You are a generous fellow, Joe, but even generosity can be carried past its proper limits."

"Uncle," I exclaimed, leaning over him and whispering tremulously in his ear, "what are your suspicions? If I hear you give utterance to them, perhaps it will not be so hard for me to speak."

He hesitated, looked all about us with a questioning glance, put his mouth to my ear, and whispered:

"If I should use the name of Hartley in connection with what I have to say, would you be so very much surprised?"

With a quick semblance of emotion, I drew back.

"You think—" I tremulously commenced, and as suddenly broke off.

"That it was he who did it, and that you, knowing how your father loved him and built his hopes upon him, bore the blame of it yourself."

"Ha!" I exclaimed, with a deep breath as of relief. The suspicions of Uncle Joe were worth hearing.

He seemed to be satisfied with the ejaculation, and with an increase of eagerness in his tone, went quickly on:

"Am I not right, my boy? Is not this the secret of your whole conduct from that dreadful day to this?"

"Don't ask me," I again pleaded, taking care, however, to draw a step nearer and exclaim in almost the same breath: "Why should you think it must necessarily have been one of us? What did *you* know that you should be so posi-

tive it was either he or I who committed this dishonest action?"

"What did I know? Why, what everybody else did. That your father, hearing a noise in his study one night, rose up quietly and slipped to the door of communication in time to hear a stealthy foot leave the room and proceed down the hall toward the apartment usually occupied by you and your brother; that, alarmed and filled with vague distrust, he at once lit the lamp, only to discover his desk had been forcibly broken into and a number of coupon bonds taken out; that, struck to the heart, he went immediately to the room where you and your brother lay, found him lying quiet, and to all appearance asleep, while you looked flushed and with difficulty met his eye; that without hesitation he thereupon accused you of theft, and began to search the apartment; that he found the bonds, as we both know, in a cupboard at the head of your bed, and when you were asked if you had put them there you remained silent, and neither then nor afterward made any denial of being the one who stole them."

A mournful "Yes" was all the reply I ventured upon.

"Now it never seemed to occur to your father to doubt your guilt. The open window and the burglar's jimmy found lying on the floor of the study, being only so many proofs, to his mind, of your deep calculation and great duplicity. But I could not help thinking, even on that horrible morning, that your face did not wear a look of guilt so much as it did that of firm and quiet resolution. But I was far from suspecting the truth, my boy, or I should never have allowed you to fall a victim to your father's curse, and be sent forth like a criminal from home and kindred. If only for Edith's sake I would have spoken—dear, trusting, faithful girl that she is!"

"But—but—" I brokenly ejaculated, anxious to gain as much of the truth as was possible in the few minutes allotted me; "what has awakened your suspicions at this late day? Why should you doubt Hartley now, if you did not then?"

"Well, I cannot really say. Perhaps Edith's persistent aversion to your brother has had

something to do with it. Then he has grown cold and hard, while you have preserved your boyish freshness and affection. I—I don't like him, that is the truth; and with my dislike arose doubts, and—and—well, I cannot tell how it is, but I will believe you if you say he was the one to blame in this matter; and what is more, your father will believe you too; for he does not feel the same satisfaction in Hartley's irreproachable character that he used to, and—and—”

A sudden movement in the crowd stopped him. A tall, graceful-looking woman clad entirely in white had just entered the room and seemed to be making her way toward us.

“There is Edith!” he declared. “She is hunting for the yellow domino ornamented with black that she has been told conceals her lover. Shall I go and fetch her here, or will you wait until she spies you of her own accord?”

“I will wait,” I uneasily replied, edging nearer to the window with the determination of using it as a means of escape if my companion only gave me the chance. “See! she is in the hands of an old Jew, who seems to be greatly

taken with the silver trimmings on her sleeves. Suppose you improve the opportunity to slip away," I laughingly suggested. "Lovers' meetings are not usually of an order to interest third parties."

"Are n't they, you rogue!" retorted the old gentleman, giving me a jocosé poke in the ribs. "Well, well, I suppose you are right. But you have not told me—"

"I will tell you every thing in an hour," I hastily assured him. "I am going to meet my father in the library, and after he has heard the truth, you shall be admitted and all will be explained."

"That is only fair," he replied. "Your father has the first rights, of course. But Joe, my boy, remember I am not over and above patient of disposition, and don't keep me waiting too long." And with an affectionate squeeze of my hand, he stepped out from the recess where we stood and made his way once more into the throng.

No sooner had he left my side than I threw up the window. "Now is the time for the real Joe to appear upon the scene," was my mental

decision. "I have done for him what he as a gentleman would probably never do for himself—pumped this old party and got every thing in trim for Hartley's discomfiture. But the courting business is another matter; also the interview with the outraged father in the library. That cannot be done by proxy; so here goes for a change of actors."

And with reckless disregard of consequences, I prepared to jump from the window, when a sudden light flashed over the lawn beneath and I saw I was at least twelve feet from the ground.

"Well," I exclaimed, drawing hastily back; "such a leap as that is too much to expect of any man!" And with the humiliating consciousness of being caught in a trap, I proceeded to close the window.

"Joe!"

'T was a low whisper, but how thrilling! Turning, I greeted, with the show of fervor I considered necessary to the occasion, the white-veiled lady who had glided into my retreat.

"Did you think I was never coming, Joe? Everybody who could get in my way certainly

managed to do so. Then Hartley is so suspicious, and followed me with his eyes so persistently, I did not dare show my designs too plainly. It is only this minute he left my side. If you had been anywhere else I do not know as I should have succeeded even now in getting a word with you—oh !”

This exclamation was called forth by a sudden movement that took place near us. The curtain was drawn back and a tall man dressed in a black domino glanced in, gave us a scrutinizing look, bowed, and dropped the curtain again.

“Hartley,” she whisperingly explained.

I took her by the hand ; there was no help for it ; gesture and a lover-like demeanor must, in this case, supply the place of speech.

“Hush !” she entreated. (Not that I had spoken.) “I dare not stay. When you have seen your father, perhaps I will have courage to join you ; but now it would be better for me to go.” And her eyes roamed toward the curtain, while the little hand I held in mine grew cold and slightly trembled.

I pressed that little hand, but, as you may well

believe, did not urge her to remain. Yet she did not seem in a hurry to depart, and I do not know what complications might have ensued, if another movement in the curtain had not re-awakened her fears and caused her, notwithstanding her evident reluctance, to start quickly away.

I did not linger long behind her. Scarcely had the curtain fallen from her hand than I stepped hastily forth. But alas for my hopes of escape! No sooner had I joined the group of merry-makers circling about the open door, than I felt a touch on my arm, and looking up, saw before me the Black Domino. The hour of ten had struck and my guide to the library was at hand. There was no alternative left me but to follow him.

III.

AN UNEXPECTED CALAMITY.

FIVE minutes passed, during which I threaded more laughing groups and sauntered down more mysterious passage-ways than I would care to count. Still the mysterious Black Domino glided on before me, leading me from door to door till my patience was nearly exhausted, and I had wellnigh determined to give him the slip and make my way at once to the garden, and the no-doubt-by-this-time-highly-impatient Joe.

But before I had the opportunity of carrying out this scheme, the ominous Black Domino paused, and carelessly pointing to a door at the termination of a narrow corridor, bowed, and hastily withdrew.

"Now," said I, as soon as I found myself alone, "shall I proceed with this farce, or shall I end it? To go on means to interview Mr.

Benson, acquaint him with what has come to my knowledge during the last half hour in which I have so successfully personified his son, and by these means perhaps awake him to the truth concerning this serious matter of Joseph's innocence or Hartley's guilt ; while to stop now implies nothing more nor less than a full explanation with his son, a man of whose character, manners, and disposition I know little or nothing."

Either alternative presented infinite difficulties, but of the two the former seemed to me more feasible and less embarrassing. At all events, in talking with Mr. Benson, I should not have the sensibilities of a lover to contend with, and however unfortunate in its results our interview might be, would be at the mercy of old blood instead of young, a point always to be considered in a case where one's presumption has been carried beyond the bounds of decorum.

Unlocking the door, I stepped, as I had been told I should, into a small room adjoining the library. All around me were books. Even the door by which I had entered was laden with them, so that when it was closed, all vestige of

the door itself disappeared. Across the opening into the library stood a screen, and it was not until I had pushed this somewhat aside that I was able to look into that room.

My first glance assured me it was empty. Stark and bare of any occupant, the high-backed chairs loomed in the funereal gloom, while on the table, toward which I inadvertently glanced, stood a decanter with a solitary wineglass at its side. Instantly I remembered what had been told me concerning that glass, and stepping forward, I took it up and looked at it.

Immediately I heard, or thought I heard, an exclamation uttered somewhere near me. But upon glancing up and down the room and perceiving no one, I concluded I was mistaken, and deliberately proceeded to examine the wineglass and assure myself that no wine had as yet been poured upon the powder I found in it. Satisfied at last that Mr. Benson had not yet taken his usual evening potion, I put the glass back and withdrew again to my retreat.

I do not think another minute could have elapsed, before I heard a step in the room behind me. A door leading into an adjoining apart-

ment had opened and Mr. Benson had come in. He passed immediately to the table, poured out the wine upon the powder, and drank it off without a moment's hesitation. I heard him sigh as he put the glass down.

With a turn of my hand I slipped off both domino and mask, and prepared to announce my presence by tapping on the lintel of the door beside which I stood. But a sudden change in Mr. Benson's lofty figure startled me. He was swaying, and the arms which had fallen to his side were moving with a convulsive action that greatly alarmed me. But almost instantly he recovered himself, and paced with a steady step toward the hall door, which at that moment resounded with a short loud knock.

"Who is there?" he asked, with every appearance of his usual sternness.

"Hartley," was the reply.

"Are you alone?" the old gentleman again queried, making a move as if to unlock the door.

"Carrie is with me; no one else," came in smothered accents from without.

Mr. Benson at once turned the key, but no sooner had he done so than he staggered back.

For an instant or two of horror he stood oscillating from side to side, then his frame succumbed, and the terrified eyes of his children beheld his white head lying low, all movement and appearance of life gone from the form that but a moment before towered so proudly before them.

With a shriek, the daughter flung herself down at his side, and even the cheek of Hartley Benson grew white as he leaned over his father's already inanimate body.

"He is dead!" came in a wild cry from her lips. "See! he does not breathe. Oh! Hartley, what could have happened? Do you think that Joe—"

"Hush!" he exclaimed, with a furtive glance around him. "He may be here; let me look. *If Joe has done this—*" He did not continue, but rose, and with a rapid tread began to cross the floor in my direction.

In a flash I realized my situation. To be found by him now, without a domino, and in the position of listener, would be any thing but desirable. But I knew of no way of escape, or so for the moment it seemed. But great emer-

gencies call forth sudden resources. In the quick look I inadvertently threw around me, I observed that the *portière* hanging between me and the library was gathered at one side in very heavy folds. If I could hide behind them perhaps I might elude the casual glance he would probably cast into my place of concealment. At all events it was worth trying, and at the thought I glided behind the curtain. I was not disappointed in my calculations. Arrived at the door, he looked in, perceived the domino lying in a heap on the floor, and immediately drew back with an exclamation of undoubted satisfaction

“He is gone,” said he, crossing back to his sister’s side. Then in a tone of mingled irony and bitterness, hard to describe, cried aloud with a glance toward the open door: “He has first killed his father and then fled. Fool that I was to think he could be trusted!”

A horrified “Hartley!” burst from his sister’s lips and a suppressed but equally vehement “Villain!” from mine; but neither of us had time for more, for almost at the same instant the room filled with frightened guests, among

which I discerned the face and form of the old servant Jonas, and the flowing robes and the white garments of Uncle Joe and the graceful Edith.

To describe the confusion that followed would be beyond my powers, especially as my attention was at the time not so much directed to the effect produced by this catastrophe, as to the man whom, from the moment Mr. Benson fell to the floor, I regarded as my lawful prey. He did not quake and lose his presence of mind in this terrible crisis. He was gifted with too much self-control to betray any unseemly agitation even over such a matter as his father's sudden death. Once only did I detect his lip tremble, and that was when an elderly gentleman (presumably a doctor) exclaimed after a careful examination of the fallen man :

“ This is no case of apoplexy, gentlemen ! ”

Then indeed Mr. Hartley Benson shivered, and betrayed an emotion for which I considered myself as receiving a due explanation when, a few minutes later, I observed the same gentleman lay his hand upon the decanter and glass that stood on the table, and after raising them

one after the other to his nose, slowly shake his head, and with a furtive look around him, lock them both in a small cupboard that opened over the mantel-piece.

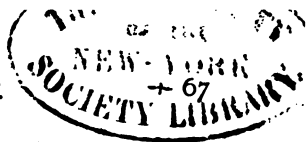
IV.

IN THE LIBRARY.

MR. BENSON was really dead. The fact being announced, most of the guests withdrew. In ten minutes after he fell, the room was comparatively clear. Only the various members of the family, together with the gentleman I have already mentioned, remained behind ; and, even of these, the two ladies were absent, they having followed the body into the adjoining room, where it had been reverently carried by the attached Jonas and another servant whose face I did not see.

“ A most unlooked-for catastrophe,” burst from the lips of Uncle Joe. “ Did you ever suspect he was a victim to heart disease ? ” he now asked, this time with looks directed toward the doctor.

“ No,” came from that gentleman in a short, sharp way, which made Hartley Benson’s pale



face flush, though his eye did not waver from its steady solemn look toward the door through which his father's form had just been carried. "Mr. Benson was sound through and through a month ago. I know, because I examined him previous to his making his will. There was no heart disease then ; that I am ready to take my oath upon."

Hartley Benson's rigid look unfastened itself from the door and turned slowly toward the sombre face of the speaker, while Uncle Joe, with an increased expression of distress, looked slowly around as if he half hoped, half feared to behold his favorite nephew advance upon them from some shadowy corner.

"My father consulted you, then?" said the former, in his slow, reserved way. "Did not that evince some suspicion of disease on his part?"

"Possibly ; a man in a despondent frame of mind will often imagine he has some deadly complaint or other. But he was quite sound ; too sound, he seemed to think. Your father was not a happy man, Mr. Benson."

There was meaning in the tone, and I was

not surprised to observe Hartley draw back. "Why," said he, "do you think—"

"I think nothing," broke in the doctor; "only"—and here he brought down his hand vigorously upon the table—"there has been prussic acid in the glass from which Mr. Benson drank this evening. The smell of bitter almonds is not to be mistaken."

An interval of silent horror followed this announcement, then a vehement "Great Heaven!" broke from the lips of Uncle Joe, while Hartley Benson, growing more and more rigid in his bearing, fixed his eyes on the doctor's face and barely ejaculated :

"Poison?"

"I say this," continued the doctor, too intent upon his own theory to notice either the growth of a terrible fear on the face of Uncle Joe, or the equally remarkable expression of subdued expectation on that of the son, "because long experience has taught me the uselessness of trying to hide such a fact as suicide, and also because, being the coroner of the county, it is my duty to warn you that an investigation will have to take place which will require certain

precautions on my part, such as the sealing up of his papers, etc."

"That is true," came from the lips of both brother and son, over whom a visible change had passed at the word "suicide."

"But I cannot think—" the former began in an agitated voice.

"That my father would do such a deed," interposed the latter. "It does not seem probable, and yet he was a very wretched man, and grief will often drive the best of us to despair."

Uncle Joe gave his nephew a strange look, but said no more. The doctor went quietly on:

"I do not know what your father's troubles were, but that he committed suicide I greatly fear, unless it can be proved the acid was taken by mistake, a conclusion which does not seem probable, for from the smell of the decanter it is evident the acid was mixed with the wine, in which I now remember advising him to take the nightly powder I prescribed to him for quite a trivial disorder a few days ago. The only thing that puzzles me is, why, if he meditated death, he should have troubled himself to take this powder. And yet it is certain he did take

it, for there is still some of the sediment of it remaining in the bottom of the glass."

"He took the powder because it was already in the glass," broke in Hartley, in a heavy tone of voice. "My sister put it there before she went up stairs to dress. I think she was afraid he would forget it. My father was very careless about small matters."

"He was careful enough not to poison any one else in the family," quoth the doctor. "There was scarcely a drop left in the decanter; he took the whole dose."

"I beg your pardon, sirs, but is it suicide you are talking about?" cried a voice suddenly over their shoulders, making them all start. Jonas, the servant, had entered from the inner room, and unseen by all but myself, had been listening to the last few words as if his life depended upon what they had to say. "If it is, why I have a bit of an observation of my own to make that may help you to settle the matter."

"You! What have you to say?" quoth the doctor, turning in surprise at the confident tone of voice in which the man spoke.

"Not much, I am sure," cried Hartley, to whom the appearance at that moment of his father's old servant was evidently most unwelcome.

"That is for you to judge, gentlemen. I can only tell you what I've seen, and that not ten minutes ago. Mr. Hartley, do you mind the man in the yellow dress that was flitting about the parlors all the evening?"

"Good heavens!" burst in uncontrollable agitation from Uncle Joe; and he caught his nephew by the arm with a look that called back the old rigid expression to the latter's face.

"Yes," was the quiet reply; "I remember seeing such a person."

"Well, sirs, I don't know as you will think any thing of it, but a little while ago I was walking up and down the balcony outside there, when I happened to look into this room, and I saw that man in the yellow dress leaning over this very table, looking into the wine-glass Miss Carrie had put there for master. He had it in his hand, and his head was down very close to it, but what he did to it or to the

decanter either, I am sure, sirs, I don't know, for I was that frightened at seeing this spectre in the room master had kept locked all day, that I just slipped off the balcony and ran round the house to find Mr. Hartley. But you was n't in the parlors, sir, nor Miss Carrie neither, and when I got to this room, there was master lying dead on the floor, and everybody crowding around him horror-struck."

"Humph!" ejaculated the doctor, looking at Uncle Joe, who had sunk in a heap into the arm-chair his nephew abstractedly pushed toward him.

"You see, sirs," Jonas resumed, with great earnestness, "Mr. Benson, for some reason or other, had been very particular about keeping his own room to-day. The library door was locked as early as six this morning, and he would let no one in without first asking who was there. That's why I felt so dumbfounded at seeing this yellow man in the room; besides——"

But no sooner had the good man arrived at this point than he stopped, with a gasp, and after a quick look at Hartley, flushed, and

drew back in a state of great agitation and embarrassment. Evidently a suspicion had just crossed the mind of this old and attached servant as to whom the Yellow Domino might be."

"Well, well," cried the doctor, "go on; let us hear the rest."

"I—I have nothing more to say," mumbled the man, while Hartley, with an equal display of embarrassment, motioned the discomfited servant to withdraw, and turned as if to hide his face over some papers on the table.

"I think the man in the yellow domino had better be found," quoth the physician, dryly, glancing from Hartley to the departing form of the servant, with a sharp look. "At all events it would be well enough for us to know who he is."

"I don't see—" began Uncle Joe, but stopped as he perceived the face of Hartley Benson slowly composing itself. Evidently he was as much interested as myself in observing what this not-easily-to-be-understood man would say and do in this sudden crisis.

We were not long left in doubt.

“Doctor,” he began, in a slow, hesitating tone, well calculated to produce the effect he desired, “we unfortunately already know who wore a yellow domino this evening. My brother Joe——”

“Hush!” implored his uncle, laying a hand on his nephew’s arm with a quick look of distress not lost on the doctor.

“Brother?” repeated the latter. “Pardon me, I did not know—— Ah, but I do remember now to have heard that Mr. Benson had another son.”

The face of Hartley grew graver and graver. “My brother has been alienated from my father for some time, so you have never seen him here. But to-night he hoped, or made me think he hoped, to effect a reconciliation ; so I managed, with my sister, to provide him with the domino necessary to insure him an entrance here. Indeed, I did more ; I showed him a private door by which he could find his way into the library, never suspecting any harm could come of son and father meeting even in this surreptitious way. I—I loved my brother, *and notwithstanding the past*, had confidence

in him. Nor can I think now he had any thing to do with the——” Here the voice of this inimitable actor broke in well-simulated distress. He sank on a chair and put his hands before his face.

The doctor had no reason to doubt this man. He therefore surveyed him with a look of grave regard.

“Mr. Benson,” said he, “you have my profoundest sympathy. A tragedy like this in a family of such eminent respectability, is enough to overwhelm the stoutest heart. If your brother is here——”

“Dr. Travis,” broke in the other, rising and grasping the physician’s hand with an appearance of manly impulse impressive in one usually so stern and self-contained, “you are, or were, my father’s friend ; can you or will you be ours? Dreadful as it is to think, my father undoubtedly committed suicide. He had a great dread of this day. It is the anniversary of an occurrence harrowing for him to remember. My brother—you see I shall have to break the secrecy of years—was detected by him in the act of robbing his desk three years

ago to-night, and upon each and every recurrence of the day, has returned to his father's house to beg for the forgiveness and restoration to favor which he lost by that deed of crime. Hitherto my father has been able to escape his importunities, by absence or the address of his servants, but to-day he seemed to have a premonition that his children were in league against him, notwithstanding Carrie's ruse of the ball, and the knowledge may have worked upon him to that extent that he preferred death to a sight of the son that had ruined his life and made him the hermit you have seen."

The doctor fell into the trap laid for him with such diabolical art.

"Perhaps; but if that is so, why is your brother not here? Only a few minutes could have elapsed between the time that Jonas saw him leaning over the table with the glass in his hand and the moment when you and your sister entered this room in face of your father's falling form. He must have been present, therefore, when your father came from his bedroom, if not when he drank the fatal glass; why, then, did he take such pains to escape, if

actuated by no keener emotion than horror at a father's suicide?"

"I do not know, I cannot say; but that he himself put the poison in the decanter I will not believe. A thief is not necessarily a parricide. Even if he were in great straits and needed the money my father's will undoubtedly leaves him, he would think twice before he ran the risk of making Carrie and myself his natural enemies. No, no, if my father has died from poison, it was through a mistake, or by the administration of his own hand, never by that of Joe Benson's."

"Ah, and has anybody here present dared to charge *him* with such a deed!"

With a start both gentlemen turned; an accusing spirit stood before them.

"Edith!" broke from Hartley's lips. "This is no place for you! Go back! go back!"

"My place is where the name of Joseph Benson is uttered," she proudly answered, "whether the words be for good or evil. I am his betrothed wife as you know, and again I ask, who has dared to utter an insinuation, however light, that he, the tender son and generous

brother, has had a criminal hand in his father's awful death?"

"No one! no one!" essayed Hartley, taking her hand with a weak attempt at soothing. "I was but saying——"

But she turned from him with a gesture of repugnance, and taking a step toward the doctor, looked him entreatingly in the face. "You have not been expressing doubts of Mr. Benson's youngest son, because he happened to wear a disguise and be present when Mr. Benson fell? You do not know Joe, sir; nobody in this town knows him. His own father was ignorant of his worth; but we know him, Uncle Joe and I, and we know he could never do a deed that could stamp him either as a dishonorable or a criminal man. If Mr. Benson has died from poison, I should as soon think *this* man had a hand in it as his poor exiled brother." And in a burst of uncontrollable wrath and indignation, she pointed, with a sudden gesture, at the startled Hartley.

But that worthy, though evidently taken aback, was not to be caught so easily.

"Edith, you forget yourself," said he, with

studied self-possession. "The horrors of this dreadful occurrence have upset you. I do not wonder at it myself, but the doctor will not so readily understand you. Miss Underhill has been strangely attached to my brother," he went on, turning to the latter with an apologetic smile that made Uncle Joe grind his teeth in silent wrath. "They were engaged previous to the affair of which I have just made mention, and naturally she could never bring herself to consider him guilty of a crime which, once acknowledged, must necessarily act as a bar of separation between them. She calls him a martyr, a victim, an exile, any thing but what he actually is. Indeed, she seems really to believe in his innocence, while we,"—he paused and looked up at his sister Carrie who had entered the room,—“while we,” he went on slowly and sadly, taking this new ally softly by the hand, “know only too well that the unhappy boy was in every respect guilty of the crime for which his father exiled him. But that is neither here nor there ; the dreadful subject before us is not what he once did, but whether his being here to-night has had any thing to do with my

father's death. I cannot think it has, and yet——"

The subtle inflection of his voice spoke volumes. This great actor had evidently been driven to bay.

"O Hartley!" came in a terrified cry from his sister; "what is this? You cannot think, they cannot think, Joe could do any thing so dreadful as that?" while over the face of Edith passed a look of despair, as she saw the countenance of the doctor slowly fill with the gloom of suspicion, and even the faithful Uncle Joe turn away as if he too had been touched by the blight of a secret doubt.

"Ah, but I wish Joe were here himself!" she cried with startling emphasis. "He should speak, even if it brought ruin amongst us."

But the doctor was a man not to be moved by so simple a thing as a woman's unreasoning emotion.

"Yes, the Yellow Domino would be very welcome just now," he allowed, with grim decision.

"That he is not here is the most damning fact of all," Hartley slowly observed. "He fled when he saw our father fall."

"But he shall come back," Edith vehemently declared.

"If he does, I shall need no further proof of his innocence," said Uncle Joe.

"Nor I, so that he comes to-night," returned the doctor.

"Then be satisfied, for here he is," I exclaimed from my retreat ; and drawing the mask over my face, and hastily enveloping myself in the yellow domino, I stepped forth into full view of the crowd around the table.

V.

THE YELLOW DOMINO.

A MINGLED sound of shrieks and exclamations greeted me.

"Joe!" cried Edith, bounding forward.

But I waved her back, and turned with a severe gesture toward Hartley Benson.

"What are your reasons," I demanded, "for thinking the poisoning that has taken place here was the work of the Yellow Domino?"

"Do you ask me?" he retorted, after a moment's pause, during which my voice echoed through the room, waking strange gleams of doubt on the faces of more than one person present. "You wish to dare me, then?" he hissed, coming a step nearer.

"I wish to know what the Yellow Domino has done that you or any one should consider him as responsible for the tragedy that has here taken place," I steadily replied.

“Are you not my brother, then?” he cried, in mingled rage and anxiety. “Was it not you I met under the evergreens and supplied with a yellow domino, in order to give you the opportunity of seeing our father to-night and effecting the reconciliation which you had so long desired? Are you not he who afterward followed me to this room and hid himself in the closet from which you have just come, all for the purpose, as you said, of throwing yourself at your father’s feet and begging pardon for a past of which you had long ago repented? Or are you some reckless buffoon who has presumed to step into the domino my brother left behind him, and careless of the terrible trouble that has overwhelmed this family, come here with your criminal jests to puzzle and alarm us?”

“I am the man to whom you gave the domino, if that is what you wish to know, Hartley Benson; and I am the man whom you led into the ambush of this closet, for such reasons as your own conscience must inform you. If the Yellow Domino put poison into Mr. Benson’s wine, then upon me must lie the

burden of the consequences, for I alone have worn the disguise of this mask from the moment we met under the evergreens till now, as I think may be proved by this gentleman you call Uncle Joe, and this lady you address as Edith."

This mode of attack had the desired effect.

"Who are you?" burst from Hartley's lips, now blanched to the color of clay. "Unmask him, doctor; let us see the man who dares to play us tricks on such a night as this!"

"Wait!" cried I, motioning back not only the doctor, but Uncle Joe and the ladies—the whole group having started forward at Hartley's words. "Let us first make sure I am the Yellow Domino who has been paraded through the parlors this evening. Miss Benson, will you pardon me if I presume to ask you what were the words of salutation with which you greeted me to-night?"

"Oh!" she cried, in a tremble of doubt and dismay, "I do not know as I can remember; something about being glad to see you, I believe, and my hope that your plans for the evening might succeed."

"To which," said I, "I made no audible reply, but pressed your hand in mine, with the certainty you were a *friend* though you had not used the word 'Counterfeit.'"

"Yes, yes," she returned, blushing and wildly disturbed, as she had reason to be.

"And you, Uncle Joe," I went on ; "what were your words? How did you greet the man you had been told was your erring nephew?"

"I said: 'To counterfeit wrong when one is right, necessarily opens one to a misunderstanding.'"

"To which ambiguous phrase I answered, as you will remember, with a simple, 'That is true,' a reply by the way that seemed to arouse your curiosity and lead to strange revelations."

"God defend us!" cried Uncle Joe.

The exclamation was enough. I turned to the trembling Edith.

"I shall not attempt," said I, "to repeat or ask you to repeat any conversation which may have passed between us, for you will remember it was too quickly interrupted by Mr. Benson for us to succeed in uttering more than a dozen or so words. However, you will do me the

kindness to acknowledge your belief that I am the man who stood with you behind the parlor curtains an hour ago."

"I will," she replied, with a haughty lift of her head that spoke more loudly than her blushes.

"It only remains, then, for Mr. Benson to assure himself I am the person who followed him to the closet. I know of no better way of his doing this than to ask him if he remembers the injunctions which he was pleased to give me, when he bestowed upon me this domino."

"No,—that is,—whatever they were, they were given to the man I supposed to be my brother."

"Ha, then ; it was to your *brother*," I rejoined, "you gave that hint about the glass I would find on the library table ; saying that if it did not smell of wine I would know your father had not had his nightly potion and would yet come to the library to drink it ;—an intimation, as all will acknowledge, which could have but the one result of leading me to go to the table and take up the glass and look into it in the suspicious manner which has been reported to you."

He was caught in his own toils and saw it. Muttering a deep curse, he drew back, while a startled "Humph!" broke from the doctor, followed by a quick, "Is that true? Did you tell him that, Mr. Benson?"

For reply the now thoroughly alarmed villain leaped at my throat. "Off with that toggery! Let us see your face! I shall and will know who you are."

But I resisted for another moment while I added: "It is, then, established to your satisfaction that I am really the man who has worn the yellow domino this evening. Very well, now look at me, one and all, and say if you think I am likely to be a person to destroy Mr. Benson." And with a quick gesture I threw aside my mask, and yielded the fatal yellow domino to the impatient hands of Mr. Hartley Benson.

The result was a cry of astonishment from those to whom the face thus revealed was a strange one, and a curse deep and loud from him to whom the shock of that moment's surprise must have been nearly overwhelming.

"Villain!" he shrieked, losing his self-possession in a sudden burst of fury; "spy! informer!

I understand it all now. You have been set over me by my brother. Instructed by him, you have dared to enter this house, worm yourself into its secrets, and by a deviltry only equalled by your presumption, taken advantage of your position to poison my father and fling the dreadful consequences of your crime in the faces of his mourning family. It was a plot well laid ; but it is foiled, sir, foiled, as you will see when I have you committed to prison to-morrow."

"Mr. Benson," I returned, shaking him loose as I would a feather, "this is all very well ; but in your haste and surprise you have made a slight mistake. You call me a spy ; so I am ; but a spy backed by the United States Government is not a man to be put lightly into prison. I am a detective, sir, connected at present with the Secret Service at Washington. My business is to ferret out crime and recognize a rogue under any disguise and in the exercise of any vile or deceptive practices." And I looked him steadily in the face.

Then indeed his cheek turned livid, and the eye which had hitherto preserved its steadiness sought the floor.

"A detective!" murmured Miss Carrie, shrinking back from the cringing form of the brother whom, but a few hours before, she had deemed every thing that was noble and kind.

"A detective!" echoed Edith, brightening like a rose in the sunshine.

"In government employ!" repeated Uncle Joe, honoring me with a stare that was almost comic in its mingled awe and surprise.

"Yes," I rejoined; "if any one doubts me, I have papers with me to establish my identity. By what means I find myself in this place, a witness of Mr. Benson's death and the repositior of certain family secrets, it is not necessary for me to inform you. It is enough that I am here, have been here for a good hour, posted behind that curtain; that I heard Jonas' exclamation as he withdrew from the balcony, saw Mr. Benson come in from his bedroom, drink his glass of wine, and afterward fall at the feet of his son and daughter; and that having been here, and the witness of all this, I can swear that if Mr. Benson drank poison from yonder decanter, he drank poison that was put into it before either he or the Yellow Domino entered

this room. Who put it there, it is for you to determine ; my duty is done for to-night." And with a bow I withdrew from the group about me and crossed to the door.

But Miss Carrie's voice, rising in mingled shame and appeal, stopped me. "Don't go," said she ; "not at least until you tell me where my brother Joseph is. Is he in this town, or has he planned this deception from a distance ? I—I am an orphan, sir, who at one blow has lost not only a dearly beloved father but, as I fear, a brother too, in whom, up to this hour, I have had every confidence. Tell me, then, if any support is left for a most unhappy girl, or whether I must give up all hopes of even my brother Joe's sympathy and protection."

'Your brother Joe,' I replied, "has had nothing to do with my appearance here. He and I are perfect strangers ; but if he is a tall, broad-shouldered, young man, shaped something like myself, but with a ruddy cheek and light curling hair, I can tell you I saw such a person enter the shrubbery at the southwest corner of the garden an hour or so ago."

"No, he is here !" came in startling accents

over my shoulders. And with a quick leap Joe Benson sprang by me and stood handsome, tall, and commanding in the centre of the room. "Hartley! Carrie! Edith! what is this I hear? My father stricken down, my father dying or dead, and I left to wander up and down through the shrubbery, while you knelt at his bedside and received his parting blessing? Is this the recompense you promised me, Hartley? this your sisterly devotion, Carrie? this your love and attention to my interests, Edith?"

"O Joe, dear Joe, do not blame us!" Carrie made haste to reply. "We thought you were here. A man *was* here, that man behind you, simulating you in every regard, and to him we gave the domino, and from him we have learned——"


"What?" sprang in thundering tones from the young giant's throat as he wheeled on his heel and confronted me.

"That your brother Hartley is a villain," I declared, looking him steadily in the eye.

"God!" was his only exclamation as he turned slowly back and glanced toward his trembling brother.

"Sir," said I, taking a step toward Uncle Joe, who, between his eagerness to embrace the new-comer and his dread of the consequences of this unexpected meeting, stood oscillating from one side to the other in a manner ridiculous enough to see, "what do you think of the propriety of uttering aloud and here, the suspicions which you were good enough to whisper into my ears an hour ago? Do you see any reason for altering your opinion as to which of the two sons of Mr. Benson invaded his desk and appropriated the bonds afterward found in their common apartment, when you survey the downfallen crest of the one and compare it with the unfaltering look of the other?"

"No," he returned, roused into sudden energy by the start given by Hartley. And advancing between the brothers, he looked first at one and then at the other with a long, solemn gaze that called out the color on Hartley's pale cheek and made the crest of Joe rise still higher in manly pride and assertion. "Joe," said he, "for three years now your life has lain under a shadow. Accused by your father of a dreadful crime, you have resolutely refused to



exonerate yourself, notwithstanding the fact that a dear young girl waited patiently for the establishment of your innocence in order to marry you. To your family this silence meant guilt, but to me and mine it has told only a tale of self-renunciation and devotion. Joe, was I right in this? was Edith right? The father you so loved, and feared to grieve, is dead. Speak, then : Did you or did you not take the bonds that were found in the cupboard at the head of your bed three years ago to-night? The future welfare, not only of this faithful child but of the helpless sister, who, despite her belief in your guilt, has clung to you with unwavering devotion, depends upon your reply."

"Let my brother speak," was the young man's answer, given in a steady and nobly restrained tone.

"Your brother will not speak," his uncle returned. "Don't you see you must answer for yourself? Say, then : Are you the guilty man your father thought you, or are you not? Let us hear, Joe."

"I am not!" avowed the young man, bowing his head in a sort of noble shame that must

have sent a pang of anguish through the heart of his brother.

"Oh, I knew it, I knew it!" came from Edith's lips in a joyous cry, as she bounded to his side and seized him by one hand, just as his sister grasped the other in a burst of shame and contrition that showed how far she was removed from any participation in the evil machinations of her elder brother.

The sight seemed to goad Hartley Benson to madness. Looking from one to the other, he uttered a cry that yet rings in my memory: "Carrie! Edith! do you both forsake me, and all because of a word which any villain might have uttered? Is this the truth and constancy of women? Is this what I had a right to expect from a sister, a—a friend? Carrie, you at least always gave me your trust,—will you take it away because a juggling spy and a recreant brother have combined to destroy me?"

But beyond a wistful look and a solemn shake of the head, Carrie made no response, while Edith, with her eyes fixed on the agitated countenance of her lover, did not even seem to hear the words of pleading that were addressed to her.

The shock of the disappointment was too much for Hartley Benson. Clenching his hand upon his breast, he gave one groan of anguish and despair and sank into a chair, inert and helpless. But before we could any of us take a step toward him, before the eyes of the doctor and mine could meet in mutual understanding, he had bounded again to his feet, and in a burst of desperation seized the chair in which he sat, and held it high above his head.

"Fools! dotards!" he exclaimed, his eyes rolling in frenzy from face to face, but lingering longest on mine, as if there he read the true secret of his overthrow, as well as the promise of his future doom. "You think it is all over with me; that there is nothing left for you to do but to stand still and watch how I take my defeat. But I am a man who never acknowledges defeat. There is still a word I have to say that will make things a little more even between us. Listen for it, you. It will not be long in coming, and when you hear it, let my brother declare how much enjoyment he will ever get out of his victory."

And whirling the chair about his head, he

plunged through our midst into the hall without.

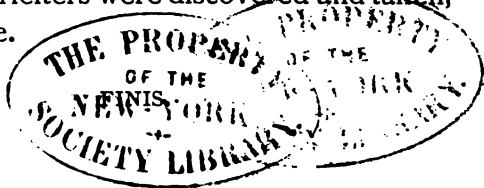
For an instant we stood stupefied, then Carrie Benson's voice rose in one long, thrilling cry, and with a bound she rushed toward the door. I put out my hand to stop her, but it was not necessary. Before she could cross the threshold the sudden, sharp detonation of a pistol-shot was heard in the hall, and we knew that the last dreadful word of that night's tragedy had been spoken.

The true secret of Hartley Benson's action in this matter was never discovered. That he planned his father's violent death, no one who was present at the above interview ever doubted. That he went further than that, and laid his plans in such a manner that the blame, if blame ensued, should fall upon his innocent brother, was equally plain, especially after the acknowledgment we received from Jonas, that he went out on the balcony and looked in the window at the special instigation of his young master. But why this arch villain, either at his own risk or at that of the man he hated, felt himself

driven to such a revolting crime, will never be known ; unless, indeed, the solution be found in his undoubted passion for the beautiful Edith, and in the accumulated pressure of certain secret debts for whose liquidation he dared not apply to his father.

I never revealed to this family the true nature of the motives which actuated me in my performance of the part I played that fatal night. It was supposed by Miss Carrie and the rest, that I was but obeying instructions given me by Mr. Benson ; and I never undeceived them. I was too much ashamed of the curiosity which was the mainspring of my action to publish each and every particular of my conduct abroad ; though I could not but congratulate myself upon its results when, some time afterward, I read of the marriage of Joe and Edith.

The counterfeiters were discovered and taken, but not by me.









[illegible]

